



68: The Happiest by cali-chan

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"I swear, if those two aren't married in, say, fifteen years, I will eat my hat." Scenes from an evening at the Wheelers', circa summer 1985.

This is the *schmoopi*est thing I've ever written, good gawd.

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"I swear, if those two aren't married in, say, fifteen years, I will eat my hat."

"Yeah, okay. But what if people don't wear hats anymore in fifteen years?"

"*Dustin.*"

Will stopped on his trek up the Wheelers' basement stairs, as Lucas and Dustin had now halted and were obstructing the way out the door. They had been heading upstairs when Lucas snuck a peek behind them and scoffed at the sight of Mike and El, who had stayed in the basement.

The four of them had been playing D&D for most of the afternoon, and El had watched the proceedings with enthusiasm initially (she couldn't play herself; all the rules were a little too much of an undertaking, still, but she liked following the story and found the boys' enthusiasm contagious). After a while, though, her attention drifted and eventually she found herself on the couch, reading comic books, listening to music on Mike's Walkman, and finally picking up Mike's guitar- which he had learned to play during Eleven's year-long absence- and plucking at the strings experimentally.

The campaign was paused when Mrs. Wheeler poked her head in to ask if they were all staying for dinner, and the boys dutifully mobilized up the stairs to tell their parents they were staying (nobody

turned down food by Mrs. Wheeler, it was just not a thing that happened). Mike was going that way, too, but El caught his sleeve and in her typical quiet, curious tone asked him how the guitar worked. So of course they stayed behind so that he could explain, and of course Lucas snuck one glance at them and rolled his eyes so hard they almost stayed stuck backward.

"I'm just saying, you never know what might happen!" Dustin defended himself from his friend's annoyed glare. "Besides, I should point out that you're not even wearing a hat at the moment."

"That's not the point!" Lucas retorted, raising his hands in frustration. "What I'm saying is: look at them. Can they get any more obvious?"

Will spun lightly on his heel to sneak a peek at the pair. Eleven was sitting on the couch, and Mike was crouching in front of her, adjusting the guitar in her grip so that it would sit in the right position (Mike was a lot taller than her by now, so the instrument was a bit big for her). They would speak to each other in hushed tones, the corners of their mouths lifting almost involuntarily into smiles, and Mike held her hands delicately as he moved them into position, as if she were breakable, made of china.

Lucas and Dustin continued to argue back and forth. Probably thought they were being discreet about it, too, but the truth was that their bickering was never quiet. Luckily for them, Mike and El were so engrossed in each other, they probably didn't even hear them.

They weren't dating, as far as the boys knew. Dustin had actually brought up the point, not too long ago, that Eleven might not even fully understand the intricacies of dating- and Will tended to agree. But Lucas was right: there was no doubt that they liked each other. Even if you didn't know the two of them, it was there in the way they looked at each other: Mike, like he was still absolutely amazed to even have someone like her in his life, and El, like he was the single pillar holding up her entire world.

Will might not have been around when the two of them met, but he knew Mike, and because of that he knew how Mike felt about her. Not that Mike had ever told him in so many words, but Will could read between the lines easily enough. Lucas might be Mike's best

friend, the one person in their little gang he'd known the longest and hung out with most often, but when it came to feelings, Mike tended to come to Will. Said he was a better listener, and wouldn't tease him like Lucas and Dustin surely would.

Will liked his talks with Mike, too. He tried asking the others about Eleven during the year she was away, but while Lucas told him some stories, he would always inevitably grow uncomfortable and end the conversation with a mumbled "maybe you should ask Mike." It took Will a while to learn that it was because he felt guilty about the way he treated Eleven during that fatidic week. Dustin was always happy to talk about Eleven, but he tended to over-exaggerate things, and Will got enough of superheroes from the comics. He wanted to know about the real girl.

So it was Mike he always asked about her. And while he could see that sometimes bringing her up made Mike sad, at the same time he seemed to like talking about Eleven in general; since Will had never met her, he could focus on telling him about the good things that happened that week, rather than constantly dwelling on the fact that she was gone.

Will didn't mind. He wanted to know about how fierce, determined and smart El was. Mike's unfailing belief that she would come back made Will feel like, if he could be even half as strong as she was, maybe he, too, could survive the dark times he was living through. Which, at that point, had been considerably dark, what with the puking up slugs from another dimension and momentarily fading out of his own in a blink.

So, Will knew Mike was in love with Eleven before he even knew Eleven. When he finally got to meet the girl, saw her turn her brown eyes towards Mike with just as much emotion, he was reassured that the feeling was very much mutual. And he'd gotten to know El very well in the past few months; they'd bonded over their Upside Down experiences, silently basking in the feeling that they were finally out of that place for good, and often jokingly commiserated over being the only sane people in their close-knit group of friends. He knew how important Mike was to her; if this new, bright, overwhelming life was an infinite universe of possibilities for El, then surely Mike was her sun.

They might be taking their time with things, maybe not ready to take the first step or maybe not mature enough to understand or admit the extent of their feelings (they were just teenagers, after all, and who in that day and age could say that they met the love of their life at twelve? He himself would say it was crazy if he didn't think he was seeing it with his own eyes), but they'd get there eventually.

And whenever that happened, Will would be ecstatic for them.

With a smile, he turned back to Lucas and Dustin, who seemed about a second away from wrestling each other down the stairs. "I'll throw my hat in for ten years," he interjected, chuckling at his own pun.

Lucas signaled in his direction, triumphant. "See? He gets it!"

"He's not even wearing a hat either!" Dustin groaned. He pulled his baseball cap off his head and cradled it against his chest as if protecting it. "Whatever," he huffed. "I'm not losing my favorite hat on an obvious bet. Have at it. I'm going upstairs to have dinner." He pushed past Lucas with as much attitude as he could muster, and Lucas and Will watched him go, shaking their heads with a snigger before following.

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Dinner was ready, so Nancy had volunteered to go tell Mike and Eleven. Well, "volunteered" implied she had a little more of a choice than she did; in reality she was the only one available because her mother was busy serving the food, Holly was napping, and Mike's three friends were engrossed in some comic book or other in the living room.

The trio had wandered upstairs a while ago to call their parents and inform them they were staying for dinner, but even after they were done with that task, they lingered around on the main floor. She didn't know if they were staying away from the basement on purpose or if they really just got distracted by comic books (she wouldn't put

it past them, really- she loved those kids like little brothers, but let's face it: they were nerds).

She could see the sense in them wanting to leave the basement to Mike and Eleven, though. Every time she had to look for those two, she was a little paranoid that she'd find them making out or something and things would get horribly awkward, but so far her paranoia had been unwarranted. And tonight would not be the exception.

She stepped down the stairs quietly so as to not to startle them, but she didn't even have to- they were so focused on the guitar (and each other) that they didn't even notice her presence. Mike was sitting beside El on the side of the guitar neck, pressing his fingers on top of hers to show her how to press the strings. El was paying more attention to his face, so close to her own, than to her fingers.

He murmured something to her that made them both giggle, and she switched her gaze to the guitar strings with a smile. Nancy had to bite her lip to keep herself from going "awwww!" out loud.

They were just too cute!

Nancy knew her brother was utterly besotted with Eleven. She knew it when the girl was there and he denied it, she knew it when the girl was gone and he absolutely refused to talk about it, and she knew it when the girl came back and he, eventually, admitted it to her in an awkward mumble that she didn't need to fully hear to understand. There was something about seeing them together, though, in a regular setting when nothing strange was happening around them and nobody in their vicinity was in imminent danger, that really put things into perspective for Nancy.

Sure, tweens with crushes were always adorable, but there was something a bit more substantive about whatever there was between her little brother and his kinda-sorta-but-not-really girlfriend. Devotion at that level wasn't something one usually saw in middle school "couples." Heck, Nancy wasn't sure she'd ever experienced it herself, in any of her relationships. She could only hope she would, some day.

It really was funny: her parents' marriage had made her completely cynical of relationships, and yet here were these two fourteen-year-olds making her believe in love again.

El played a chord and Mike's voice rose ever-so-lightly when he excitedly told her how well she was doing, so Nancy heard it clearly where she stood. A lock of hair fell in front of El's face as she tried to adjust her fingers, and she saw Mike push it behind her ear with a soft smile on his lips, which El quickly returned. That was the moment Nancy decided to announce her presence; somehow it felt like she was intruding on a very personal moment, no matter how innocent it all was.

She cleared her throat.

Both teens looked up. "Oh. Hey, Nance," Mike said, sounding a bit surprised because, of course, they had been so engrossed in each other that they hadn't noticed she'd been standing there watching them for like two minutes already. "What's up?"

"It's dinnertime," Nancy said, pointing up the stairs. "And your friends had a head start, so you might want to get there quick or there'll be no food left. Just a warning."

Her brother nodded. Both kids stood up from the sofa and Eleven handed Mike his guitar. He walked to the back of the room, in the corner by the bookcase and El waited for him by the sofa. Just as he found what he was looking for, he looked up at her and smiled again. "You go ahead upstairs. I'm just gonna put the guitar back into its bag and I'll be right there, okay?"

There it was again; there was a softness, a sense of wonder to Mike's gaze and tone whenever he spoke to Eleven that she'd never seen in him when it came to anyone else. And even if they bickered all the time, she loved her little brother- she wanted him to have that in his life for as long as he could.

And El, too. They hadn't interacted much at the beginning, but now that things settled down, Nancy could say with absolute certainty that she adored that girl, and the palpable, pure trust El had in her brother never failed to tug at Nancy's heart. She wanted El to be

happy. She wanted both of them to be happy. And seeing them together like this, today, gave her hope that maybe things would be good for them from here on out.

El nodded and moved to go upstairs. "Hey, El," Nancy called out as the girl approached. Eleven stopped one step below her and looked up at Nancy with an expectant gaze. Nancy didn't say anything straight away, but leaned forward to wrap the younger girl in a hug. "I'm really happy you're back with us," she finally said, giving the girl an extra squeeze.

"I'm happy, too," El spoke back as they separated, although Nancy could tell by the slightly befuddled look on the girl's face that she didn't really understand where the sudden sentiment was coming from. Seeing that Nancy didn't offer any further explanations, Eleven gave her a quick smile and skipped up the stairs toward the dining room.

When Nancy looked down again, she found Mike standing at the foot of the stairs, giving her a *look*. "You're being weird," he declared, an eyebrow raised as if to emphasize the idea.

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, shush, you," she retorted with a shake of her head. "Just come on up, will you? I'm hungry and we're already late as it is." She didn't wait for his answer before turning on her heel and climbing the steps. She heard Mike follow a couple of seconds later.

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Hopper reclined his car seat back, crossed his hands behind his head and pushed his hat over his tired eyes as he waited for Eleven to come out of the house. Because that was his life now: driving up to the Wheelers' driveway every evening (honking twice and then waiting in the car because he knew it annoyed Karen) to pick up his ward, who, like most kids her age, spent most of her time at other people's houses during the summer.

If someone had come up to him three years previous and told him in the future he'd be the guardian of a telekinetic fourteen-year-old, he would've laughed in their face. Now, he wasn't sure if it was the telekinetic part of it or the teenager part of it that was giving him more gray hairs.

It took a couple of minutes for the front door to open. Hopper cracked one eye open to see Eleven walk out, followed closely by the Wheeler boy, and he decided.

The teenager part. Definitely the teenager part.

The duo lingered by the door for a few more minutes, talking animatedly with big grins on their faces, because these two were more joined at the hip than most normal teenagers were (and that didn't show any signs of going away, possibly ever). There was a whole process of "uncoupling" that Hop found a bit silly, but it happened every night.

Of course, Hopper wasn't dumb. He knew those two were something of an item, even if at the moment they weren't touching at all; their goodbyes were all mostly innocent. And Hop liked the Wheeler kid, really- liked that he had spunk, liked that he was loyal to a fault, and liked that he would sooner chop off his own hand than hurt Eleven on purpose- but El was as good as a daughter to him. So yeah, he liked the Wheeler boy well enough, but he also remembered what he himself was like at fourteen, so he was keeping an eye on the kid, regardless.

Subtly, though. Anyone who could put a smile that bright on that girl's face deserved to get a little leeway. She'd been through enough horrors in her life already, and Hop was a sucker for that smile. That's why he pretended not to notice when Eleven snuck a quick, cautious glance at the car before standing up on her tiptoes to give Wheeler a peck on the lips.

Okay, maybe he'd make sure to have his gun visible at all times whenever the boy was around.

El finally made it to the car, giving the Wheeler kid one last wave before securing her seatbelt and turning to her guardian with a

content smile. Hopper, making a show of pretending she had just woken him up from a nap, fixed up his hat and seat before greeting her. "Had fun today?"

She nodded eagerly. "Mike is going to teach me to play guitar!" she announced joyously. She showed him something she held in her hands- a guitar pick, by the looks of it- smiling like someone had just told her Christmas had come early.

"...Of course he is," Hopper muttered under his breath before turning the key in the ignition.

El was turning the dials on the radio before Hopper could even hit the gas. He rarely bothered with it, to be honest, and when he did he listened mostly to old school Johnny Cash and the like, but Eleven preferred more current hits. The poppish sound grated on him, but he always let her have it because his place was only about ten minutes away by car... and because she had him wrapped around her little finger, of course.

He cleared his throat. "Hey, kid."

"Hmm?" Eleven acknowledged as she bobbed her head to the rhythm of the music.

"Are you happy?"

He couldn't gauge her expression in full because he was driving, but out of the corner of his eye he saw her look down at her hands in her lap, at the guitar pick she was tenderly stroking with her fingers like it was some precious jewel rather than a cheap piece of plastic, and bite her lip. He'd bet her cheeks were flushed, too, but he couldn't exactly see it, as it was so dark.

But then she looked up and gave him a smile; that smile he loved. The one that, Joyce often joked, made his heart grow three sizes. The one that confirmed that all the craziness and the danger, every single shitty situation they'd been through in the past couple of years, had been worth it just to see this sweet girl glowing this way.

"I'm the happiest," she stated, leaving no room for doubt.

And that was all Hopper needed to hear.